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THE
PLACE AND INFLUENCE IN
THE CHURCH MOVEMENT
OF
CHURCH CONGRESSES

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BY

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THE PLACE AND INFLUENCE OF CHURCH CONGRESSES IN THE CHURCH MOVEMENT.

THE SUBJECT to which I desire this evening to direct the attention of the most representative body which the Church in London has ever possessed, is a chapter in the contemporary history of the Church of England. If, as all must own, the religious progress achieved during the present generation has been of critical importance for that Church, and of course for the nation; and if, as I shall endeavour to show, Church Congresses have had, and will have, no mean share in shaping that progress, then (whatever may be my shortcomings in the treatment of the question) I shall at least not have wasted your time, by leading you to think of matters little deserving of serious thought.

The idea of supplementing Academies or Societies—that is, stationary bodies of men, devoted to some common object of serious pursuit—by Congresses or larger meetings, assembling at rarer intervals, and with a laxer system of membership, is, I believe, of foreign origin, and the offspring of an age of facilitated locomotion. It took root in England when the British Association was founded, but the winter of 1861 had come before—thanks to the energies of two resident Fellows of Cambridge Colleges, of whom, as in this connection, so for their great services to the Church at large, I cannot speak too highly, Mr. Emery, now Archdeacon of Ely, and the

lamented W. J. Beamont, of Trinity College—the first Church Congress met in the Hall of King's College, Cambridge. It was but a scanty assemblage, and it boasted of no episcopal presidency, the chair being filled by the late Archdeacon France of Ely. The one which gathered during the subsequent summer at Oxford, in the Sheldonian Theatre, with Bishop Wilberforce as its President, was the earliest manifestation of the organisation in its normal completeness. The autumns of subsequent years have witnessed similar gatherings at Manchester, Bristol, Norwich, York, Wolverhampton, Dublin, Liverpool, Southampton, Nottingham, Leeds, and Bath, the diocesan having in each instance been in the chair, while it has been decided that another such Congress shall be held at Brighton before the present year closes.

The most salient characteristics of Church Congresses are the democratic simplicity of their organisation, and the autocratic limitation under which they are allowed to deliberate. Membership is voluntary for clergymen and laymen, under the single condition of communion with the Church of England. Women may attend the meetings, though happily there has never been a claim from any one to address the gathering. But the debates are conducted under the triple restriction of no voting or authoritative summing up, of a selected list of subjects published beforehand, and of the initiation of each topic (a process which not unfrequently takes up about two-thirds of the appointed sitting) being distributed among selected readers and speakers, at the choice of an organising Committee, by whom it is published in the programme—not to mention a wide license of selection which Chairmen claim, among the bewildering multiplicity of competitors for the modest allowance of ten minutes each, into which the remaining time is divided. We may put the nature of their constitution in another way: they are potential *Comitia*; the whole body of citizens form their members, if only those citizens can and are willing to attend. But

who are the citizens? Here the difference between a Church Congress and one for the cultivation of any learned or social object becomes apparent. In the British Association, the Social Science, or the Archæological Congress the qualification for temporary membership is that of belonging to the human race. In a Church Congress the qualification is as wide as, but stops rigidly short at, the Anglican Communion in its broadest aspect. It is obvious that such a body as I have described, of a purely voluntary character, of a more than republican constitution, but with a very carefully, if not suspiciously, guarded order of procedure, can never hope to exercise any direct power. What remains as its heritage in the commonwealth of the Church is influence; and of the existence, the extent, and the value of that influence, I shall proceed to speak. But, before doing so, I must point to yet another restrictive qualification in the avoidance, which has been from the first a 'standing order'—how far formally enacted I cannot charge my memory to say—of any strictly doctrinal issue among the subjects of debate; while the compression of the session within the inside of a week, inclusive of the Monday to go there and the Saturday to go away, very materially abridges the possible programme.

It is plain from all these considerations that the value of any congress, as an influential organ of Church opinion at each particular session, must depend upon a good choice of subjects, and of appointed readers and speakers. In fact, the organising committee is a provisional government with constituent authority; it is mostly fluctuating, and chosen by and among the Church notables of the meeting place. The off-hand conclusion will, I doubt not, be, that it is a palpable blunder to have entrusted such power to a shifting body, which, at each successive recurrence, represents the predominant feelings of some narrow locality. This criticism may, for all practical purposes be met by the challenge to produce some plan of more

complicated machinery, yet equally respectable. But I am not content with a negative; for, while I very fully admit the extent of the responsibility thrown upon the casual organisers, and while I reserve the desirability of a larger permanent element (which is growing up), I contend that, upon the whole, admitting the powerful factor of outside opinion, there could not well have been devised a less offensive machinery for summarising the appointed work. The Congress, however constituted, can only debate upon a limited selection of questions; and it would be plainly monstrous to leave them to the accident of 'first come, first served,' by letting the aspirants fill up the notice papers by a chance priority. The committee steps in, with the feeling of responsibility which English plain-speaking brings home to all who are bold enough to accept voluntary work of a confessedly delicate description. The list of subjects has varied in interest from year to year; and there have, perhaps, been occasions on which it has erred on the side of timidity. On the other hand, the successive choice of selected readers and speakers has been subjected to much sharp, though legitimate, criticism from those who are certainly not the meekest of mankind—the controversialists of the religious press. The assignment of parts after the entertainment had been settled is even a greater difficulty than the preliminary one. Only the abstract merit of the subject-matter has to be appraised; but when the from four to six selected athletes have to be entered, a bewildering variety of cross considerations arises within an area full small for their sufficient adjustment. Those who know too much may sometimes be as ineligible as those who know too little. The Church has, for some questions, to be assumed as composed of two, and for others as of three parties, or else to be dealt with as an united fraternity. The general success of the Congress demands a certain recognition of official, political, and social distinction, as well as of technical knowledge;

oratorical gifts cannot be overlooked ; a fair balance of capacities on questions intended to be dealt with as two-sided is indispensable ; and, finally, neither the clerical nor the lay element must, if possible, be overweighted.

I may have hitherto appeared to you to be summing up doubtfully as to Church Congresses ; it is better, therefore, that I should, at the outset, explain that I hope to convince you that their place in the Church movement is legitimate and their influence healthful. But in order to do so fairly and fully, I have thought right to begin by showing you the difficulties, and it may be the deficiencies, under which they work, in order better to appreciate the good with which they may be credited. I have no intention of proposing any reform in their constitution or standing orders. I accept them as facts, and I assume that future Congresses will go on under virtually the same conditions. Their aim, as I must, at the risk of tautology, repeat, is influence, not power, and so restrictions which would be puerile or intolerable in bodies which had to reach decisive votes, and order the future actions of men, can merely be judged in the light of expediency or in expediency when they are adopted by gatherings whose single, though important, object is mutual persuasion. Briefly, then, believing as I do, that the comitiary, as distinguished from a representative, constitution is essential to the vitality of Church Congresses, I further believe that restrictions in the nature of, and as stringent as, those which exist, are indispensable to guard the order, and in guarding the order to maintain the liberty, of rational debate.

I shall proceed to treat of the influence of these Congresses on the Church movement according to an ascending scale, handling first the material, then the moral, and lastly the religious aspect of the Congress, conscious as I am that these various aspects must and ought not to be too rigidly kept separate during the discussion. In what I have to say

I shall, of course, regard the question from the only point of view which I can occupy in honesty to my own convictions, that of a follower of the so-called High Church party. I am not ashamed at owning my side; but in so doing I shall labour for peace, not controversy. I am always more glad to discover one point of agreement than to assure myself of ten of divergence among the sections of a body whose Divine mission is to dwell together in unity; and it is mainly because I believe that Church Congresses are engines of agreement, and not of divergence, that I trouble either myself or yourselves with their affairs.

To begin with the material influence of the Congresses on the movement within our Church, we must take in that Church in all the complexity of its various aspects, both as the Established Church of England and as the Anglican Communion. These two ideas are not indissolubly connected either in theory or in fact, but they are quite compatible, and, as I venture to contend—with, I hope, the unanimous assent of all Churchmen in England, and with that of a vast multitude of those outside of it—it is in the highest degree desirable to preserve them in their connection. Taking note of these conditions, I claim for Church Congresses that they tend to secure that the Church of England shall, in preserving its more strictly ecclesiastical aspects, continue to be directly recognised in the National Constitution as the religious Establishment of the country, and that while it continues to be the religious Establishment it should hold fast to its peculiar ecclesiastical characteristics.

Fundamentally different in principle, as would be a religious Establishment which derives its constitution from some act of the State, and a Church claiming the allegiance of baptised Christians, as a branch of the one Holy Catholic and Apostolic body, the two communities can, without doubt, be moulded so as to present identical external features. A Bishop is an expedient chief officer, whether he be a delegate

of the executive or a successor of the Apostles ; the division of the land into parishes with their parsons, belongs to the common-law of common-sense ; liturgical worship and pre-adjusted forms can claim the sanction of educated experience. An Establishment may be destitute of these features, and then the *onus probandi* will be upon its authorities to show if it can do as well or better without them. A Church claiming to be Apostolic may also, from some external cause, have been organised without their full manifestation having been secured. But while in this latter case the organisation is plainly defective, so in the former one the presence of such features is no *à priori* proof that the Establishment is more than an Establishment. The broad fact which is certain is, that an Establishment can assimilate the external organisation of an Apostolic Church, and that an Apostolic Church can accept the benefits of an Establishment without creating any liability why it should be called on to abandon or to modify its distinctive features. The Church of England, as it is, is a living example of this compatibility ; for it can claim the allegiance and support, without *arrière-pensée*, alike of those who regard it as a powerful and popular engine for those high moral objects, which can only be compassed by a national Establishment, and of those who reverence it as the *Civitas Dei* within its territorial borders. It is the 'truce of God' between the parties. The Establishment section might desire to make it more popular, and the Apostolic section might long to make it more hieratic, but each side, if wise, feels that the attempt, if pushed too far, would sever the alliance, and bring down the Church of England as it is with a heavy swoop. In the meantime, while patient, like all institutions, of cautious and conservative reform, it remains so long as it is not tampered with, neither too popular to be a Church, nor too hieratic to be an Establishment. Of this 'truce of God,' an active and vigorous, not to say young and bustling embodiment is the Church Congress. The professing

Churchman who attends one, need only do so, as agreeing in the words of a teacher to whom personally I own myself more indebted, in days long past, than to any other living man, for the realisation of an Apostolic Church, and for the conviction that the Church of England is, as such an one, worthy of all obedience and honour; words written after the great teacher had unhappily reasoned himself out of his earlier convictions. This writer declares the Church of England to be a 'time-honoured institution, of noble historical memories, a monument of ancient wisdom, a momentous arm of political strength, a great national organ, a source of vast popular advantage, and, to a certain point, a witness and Teacher of religious Truth.'

Commending these words of Dr. Newman* to other informers of public opinion who only resemble him in not belonging to the Church of England, I pass on to further phases of my present head. The Church Congress, I have shown, is, or may be, the truce of God between those who accept the Church of England as a merely human institution, and those who uphold it as a spiritual body. In its debates, dealing as so many of them do with the practical or administrative agencies of the existing organisation, frequent points of contact, involving no sacrifice of principle, may be found between the votaries of the two schools, and much useful information thrown into the common stock, while the inevitable ventilation of deep-rooted differences brought out, handled, and received with courtesy and Christian charity, cannot fail to put controversy on a more pacific basis than if they were always hidden away and brooded over. But, unhappily, those who adhere to the Church of England as a spiritual body, are not unanimous on many important questions. I have here reached very delicate ground, but I hope to make my way safely by speaking out plainly. High Church and Low Church now come upon the scene. These

* *Apologia pro Vitâ Suâ* (1864), Appendix, p. 25.

appellations are generally taken as symbolical of antagonism—as the titles of rival parties—and I cannot deny the accuracy of the imputation. But they may in another light be regarded with truth and charity as names indicative, not of oppugnancy but of gradation. High Church and Low Church both presuppose *a* Church. The very word ‘gradation’ involves the metaphor of a staircase or ladder. So a High Churchman may be described as one who goes up the ladder as high as he can to get the best look-out, but not so high as to risk falling over; while a Low Churchman, equally desirous of a sufficient look-out, and equally fearful of the fall over, also attempts what he considers the utmost safe altitude, which, however, happens to be some rungs under that of his compeer. I do not offer this as a perfect metaphor, but it grows naturally out of the vocables in question, and serves to place the two parties in that amicable attitude which they deserve to assume relatively to Church Congresses. If any man be asked truthfully to recapitulate the most crying shortcomings of the Church in the Georgian age, he would, quite irrespective of party, reckon personal isolation among them. This has absolutely nothing to do with High or Low. The country vicar may have been basking in the afterglow of Non-juring divinity, or in the newer light of evangelical activity, but still he was for practical purposes fighting his own battle with only his own arm to help him. The Church movement had brought the two schools within each other’s scope intellectually, and now the Church Congress enables them to meet personally. Their members are both of them Churchmen belonging to *one* Church, that Church being the Church of England. That Church accepts episcopal regimen; it is served by a threefold ministry set apart by the imposition of the Bishop’s hands; it worships God in forms of antique significance; it renders glory, honour, and praise to the Sacraments of Christ, as among the chiefest of God’s good gifts

to men. One party, no doubt, concentrates its labour on developing the Church upon those specific lines, and while anxious, even to death, for the soul's internal concerns, treats those internal concerns as under the administration of the external Church; while the other party, in acting within that external Church, makes, so to speak, something of a separate interest of the internal condition and welfare of the soul. The High Churchman may be said to be differentially jealous lest the Apostolic *depositum* of the Faith should suffer by over-much anxiety as to personal religion; the Low Churchman lest the care to sustain a formal system should overlay the warmth of personal devotion. There is, of course, infinite individual interlacing between the two parties; and, now-a-days, a school has come into prominence about which I must be excused from speaking in this connection, which appears to seek not so much to fuse as to couple them. I can only, within my allotted limits, give the roughest sketch of distinctive differences. The influence of Church Congresses in bringing the parties face to face on the topic of personal religion will come under my second head of their moral influence. Under the present one comes their value in fostering, on both sides, a broader, deeper appreciation of the Church as a system and as a corporation than was possible in the days of the earlier isolation. The organisation and multiplication of dioceses; the strengthening and enlarging of cathedrals, both in their Chapters, and in the varied work given to those Chapters to do; the development of synodical action, including the due placing of the clerical and of the lay element; the relations of our Church to other communities at home and abroad; missions to the heathen, and enterprises having a missionary character among the dark corners at home; elementary and middle-class education; the higher training of the clergy; the Universities in relation to the Church; co-operative associations of men and of women for the

service of Christ; more hearty cultivation of hymnody; increased facilities of worship; the material construction and decoration of the temple,—these all are among the subjects frequently, ably, and profitably debated at Church Congresses; these all relate to the Church as a corporate body; these all are points on which High Churchmen and Low Churchmen alike may learn, and have, I believe, by God's mercy, learnt, since they began to gather as brethren in the Congress halls, that they have far more in common, and are capable of learning far more from each other, than any man could have thought possible, brooding by the solitary warmth of his own fireside. Breezes have occasionally occurred, but they have borne a slight proportion to the mass of wholesome discussion, while they have been fewer and less sharp in later than in earlier Congresses.

Hitherto I have been dwelling on the material influence of Church Congresses as between Churchmen, and have, as I anticipated, trenched on the question of their moral value. Let me bring you back to more mundane contemplations, and treat of their material significance in reference to the nation. We have all of us, as I need hardly prove, to try conclusions with Dissent—whether devotional, political, or rationalistic; with the Liberation Society and the Education League; with philosophers and with the concentrated power of the Roman Church. The forces of indifferentism and worldliness are sometimes our unscrupulous foes, sometimes our damaging allies. The Church of England is bound, in face of the sacred treasures, of which it is the keeper and the dispenser, to hold its own, to assert its dignity, and to make its power felt in the busy mart and on the teeming thoroughfare. Towards this work of hallowed policy the Church Congress is a strong instrument ready to hand. From one populous town to another it has moved, and has exhibited in the eyes of active, intelligent, and opulent communities, to many of whom 'Church' has hitherto been a term of isolation, and therefore

of weakness, the spectacle of a Church—of the Church of England—as a vast corporate whole, loving much, energising abundantly, having its internal differences, but so confident in its intrinsic strength and in its deeper unity as to dare voluntarily to talk out those differences in the presence of universal journalism. The result has been that, in every successive town in which it has gathered, the Congress has been welcomed with a courtesy, even from those who can have no part in it, which demonstrates that the Church possesses the working strength which has won a respect such as never is accorded to the claims of lazy arrogance. I am not specially referring to the ‘working men’s meetings,’ which have for some Congresses back been an almost invariable adjunct of the more formal sessions. They are not an intrinsic feature; and I fear the speakers at them have sometimes shown tendencies to overlook so rare an opportunity of distinctively putting the Church forward before such unusual audiences. More general topics, I make no doubt, win more certain plaudits; but at a Church Congress ‘working men’s’ meeting what may be really useful in the highest degree should surely have been considered rather than what was popular. I understand the plea that the popularity of these meetings contributes to the general popularity, and therefore value, of the whole Congress, and may therefore be sought by a judicious selection of safe topics. Still I must say that such reasoning seems hardly serious enough in face of the grave responsibility of bringing Church and working classes into a juxtaposition which might be misrepresented as that of patroniser and patronised.

I have now arrived at, if I have not already trespassed into, my second and third heads, of the moral and religious influence of Church Congresses. A class of debate, or rather conference, which has only assumed a distinct personality during the three latest Congresses, is distinctly referable to these heads, namely, that upon the means of deepening the

spiritual life, or, as it was termed at the last Congress, 'the life of godliness,' as in the clergy so in the individual souls of all. Three successive conferences have produced papers and addresses of remarkable depth, spiritual and intellectual, to which I do not refer in particular, only because I have made a rule to myself to abstain absolutely from individual references. They have shown how much the High Churchman values personal religion, and how far the Low Churchman has been brought to recognise system and external order in the discharge of the more delicate offices of the Pastorate. At the same time, there is a risk in giving too great amplitude to this branch of the Congressional work. The danger which may be apprehended is, an over-encouragement to lay bare personal experiences, infinitely interesting to the soul which has undergone them, but not of a nature to make public without some deterioration of that finer moral sense in the person himself, which can hardly flourish without the co-existence of scrupulous reticence.

The religious influence of the Congresses makes itself directly felt through the devotional apparatus which is provided as an essential part of their programme. Every Congress, at least from the one at Manchester, has commenced its session with a solemn service in the great church of the meeting place, followed by a *concio* from some distinguished divine, except in two cases where the want of any leading church caused service and sermon to be multiplied. During the days of sitting, early Communions, more frequent mattins and evensongs, and noteworthy sermons have been provided in the various churches of the town, with the specific recognition of the Congress managers. On three occasions a stately dimissory service has been held upon the morrow Saturday after the session, in the cathedral of the neighbouring city within whose diocese stood the Congress town. On these exhibitions of the worshipping Church of England in the face of week-day

working mankind—not the Church of England dissecting rubrics in Commission and Law Court, but joining in psalm and anthem, and united prayer, or listening to grave words of earnest teaching, or kneeling round the altar, with one heart—I fully believe that a blessing must attend. To its outward effect I can bear witness. It was not with discourtesy, or even indifference, but with marked respect and co-operative kindness, that hardmen of business and Dissenting corporators received and even took their part in manifestations which must have seemed to them so strange as those of long processions of choirs and clergy and prelates gowned and surpliced and robed, chanting as they wended their way from trysting place to sanctuary. I know that these are but external matters; but I know also that it is as false a philosophy to underrate as to overvalue externals; and in the sense in which I wish for the moment to consider Church Congresses—that of a politic instrument in the sustentation of our Church among the foremost institutions of the realm—I consider that the evidence of such spectacles has a very decided significance.

Deeper feelings gather round these services; without them the Congress might degenerate into a battlefield of intellectual prowess. Sanctified as it is by the incense of prayer, and praise, and Sacrament, it becomes in a degree a season of spiritual refreshment. This refreshment, I venture to say, does not lose in healthiness because it is, as it were, incidental, and combined with practical action. It would be plainly impossible to bring together so large a number from such distances for a simply spiritual gathering, and if the attempt were made, the resultant might be the feverish excitement of Revivalism. The Congress, with its special topics inviting discussion, is the corrective element. Far be it from me to deprecate the machinery of extraordinary occasions of unusual devotion, wisely conceived. I was, during the last autumn, myself present at such an occasion,

from which no one, did he but throw himself into the spirit of the commemoration, could have returned untouched and unimpressed. I refer to those solemn days during which the great Church of Ely thanked God for the blessing of twelve hundred years of spiritual life, since the good Etheldreda raised her humble cell upon the fen-girt island. Here was a special and an unique occasion; no capricious addition to the Church's year, but a special amplification of one of its abiding features, and it was well laid hold of. An arbitrarily appointed day of missionary intercession, if not made into a precedent, is a holy act. Harvest thanksgivings may be defended in view of the material benefits with which they are connected, and which may be supposed peculiarly able to touch the unimaginative minds of our agricultural population. The Dedication Feast of any Church is, we all know, a time-honoured custom. But in general I am jealous of modern and arbitrarily devised days of solemnity. I am jealous not only for the honour but for the completeness of the Christian year of the Universal Church. I see that year unfold and dispense the old and the new Covenant. The Creation, and the Fall, and the Flood; the call of the chosen race, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the law on Mount Sinai; the changeful fortunes of Israel; the Gospel history from Nazareth and Bethlehem to Calvary and Olivet; the building of the Christian Church, the commemoration of the one communion and fellowship of God's elect; the anticipation of judgment to come—all find their place in the high days, and the fasts, and the seasons of the Christian year. The teachings of those times and seasons are infinite, and may be adapted to the changeful occurrences of the busiest age. The new wants of the living Church should be built upon the old traditionary lines. With these feelings, then, and jealous of over-specific additions to our devotional year, until the utmost use (a far larger use than we have yet reached) has been made of the seasons which are ours by inheritance, I hail with satis-

faction incidental and self-justified opportunities of spiritual assembling, such as meetings in the nature of our Church Congresses so manifestly supply.

There is another aspect of usefulness in which I must present the Church Congress, so as to do full justice to the subject. I have spoken of the value of the debates in relation to the topics discussed. There is, however, an antecedent advantage in the debating itself, apart from the questions raised. Ever since our Church has awakened to new life, a strong and reasonable desire has grown up, both among laymen and clergy, for opportunities of regular conference, of which the placid Englishman of George III.'s days could not have realised the slightest idea. It was a healthy and strong impulse, and its repression would have produced inward inflammation: yet the means of gratifying it at that time were sufficiently difficult to discover. There were grave reasons, so long as the Church retains its constitutional position in the nation, from which we hope and believe it will not be so easily displaced, why the *Convocatio Cleri* should not risk its status by changing its identity. Diocesan conferences are of very recent introduction, and still but partially organised. In this emergency, the Church Congress—a purely voluntary association—combining, as I showed in my earliest sentences, a wide popular constitution with a very careful internal organisation, was proffered as an expedient, not pretending to be complete, but yet claiming to be real within its limits, to bring together the classes of Churchmen anxious for common deliberation.

The fact of such an institution, so voluntary and yet so regular in its self-responsibility, being so calmly conceived, and then launched with general acceptance into the orbit of an old ecclesiastical system, of which the members were already revolving in compliance with the law of their own attraction, proves, with a vividness of illustration, which it is impossible to embody in words, how young in physique,

how fresh, how elastic, how sufficient, is the constitution of the hereditary and traditional Church of England. The fact that the Church Congress aims at influence, and has neither will nor way to grasp at power, does not at all diminish the auspicious signification of its healthy assimilation by the pre-existing Church. If that Church were not conscious of strong life, it could not stand the sudden generation of new influence within its frame. Since the Church Congress has taken root, more regular gatherings within dioceses or arch-deaconries have sprung up. Some people may argue from this incident that the Congresses have run their course, and ought to give place to more formal organisations. I cannot share this conclusion. The more completely constituted the Church is, the more abundant in good works, the more steadfast in the Faith, the more eager and successful in the salvation of souls, the more will it crave for, and the better will it use, occasions of mutual counsel more free and unconventional than Synod or ranged Conference can provide. It will find them in Church Congresses.

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